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## COVER STORY

# President's men mobilize to save face

How the arms deal came about, timeline; Congress reacts, 4A

By Johanna Neuman  
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Vice Admiral John M. Poindexter — point-man for a White House on the ropes in its effort to justify an arms-for-hostages deal with Iran — fingered his pipe Sunday and told Congress to back off.

"I will make arrangements to talk informally with them," said Poindexter, on the eve of

this week's congressional hearings into the affair. But, he told NBC's *Meet the Press*, "I probably will not participate."

Poindexter finds his National Security Council at the eye of the hurricane. Once a paper-shuffling White House unit that gave Henry Kissinger cover for his secret missions to China, the NSC, critics charge, has become Reagan's "A-Team" — a cowboy venture into back-channel, soldier-of-fortune diplomacy, answerable to no congressional committee.

Comparisons to Watergate rumble. Critics rail against

foreign policy crafted by aides who talk of invoking executive privilege to avoid testifying before Congress and presidents who cite national security concerns to explain secrets.

President Reagan's response to the crisis, in a powerful speech last week, was to wrap the arms shipments in the banner of U.S. foreign policy, arguing that the short-term hope for release of hostages was the stepchild of a long-term need to improve relations with Iran.

But Congress is returning with a Democratic majority, setting the stage for a confrontation. Friday, the House Intelligence Committee begins hearings to explore the White House's credibility and legal posture.

Ever since news of the deal leaked two weeks ago, the White House has unleashed a massive damage control patrol, with top administration officials like Chief of Staff Donald Regan defending a president who put concern for the hostages above other considerations.

But Secretary of State George Shultz, whose primary concern is relations with allies and foes in other world capitals, has been putting distance between himself and the Iranian affair.

There is no need, he said on CBS's *Face the Nation*, "for further signals" of "good faith" in the form of arms to Iranian moderates. Asked whether he had "the authority to speak for the entire administration," Shultz replied, "No."

The secretary of state had taken a back seat to the NSC staffers hired and once directed by Robert McFarlane, who has since left government.

For 18 months, they opened diplomatic channels to Iran, sent defensive arms and Bibles as "signals of good faith." It was a secret held so tight that the Joint Chiefs of Staff were not even informed.

"It is an unconstitutional exercise of power," said Scott Armstrong, director of National Security Archive, a research group. "The last time we had such an extreme example of it was Watergate. People forget that the Constitution splits foreign policy power between the president and Congress."

The NSC's autonomy has made it a unique back door for presidents exercising foreign policy judgments that might be unpopular on Capitol Hill — or need the cloak of secrecy.

Created in 1947 to advise the president on risks to U.S. security, it is estimated to have a staff of 100 and an official budget of \$4 million.

Under President Reagan, it has gained a reputation for activism, counting among its successes the invasion of Grenada and the intercept of terrorists responsible for the Achille Lauro hijacking. NSC survived previous flare-ups over its interference in Nicaragua.

Former CIA Director Stansfield Turner thinks the NSC should be faulted

for performing ineptly.

"They appear to have acted with a lot of amateurishness and naivete in this case," he said. Opening sincere channels to Iran "may happen some day, but this, if anything, would have been a very, very small toe in the water, had it succeeded."

But an ABC poll taken after Reagan's Thursday plea "for your support," found 72 percent disapproved of arms transfers to Iran. Despite Reagan's claim that the transfers were not "ransom," 56 percent did not believe him.

House Democratic Leader Jim Wright, D-Texas, Sunday warned the White House not to claim the mantle of executive privilege to mask details.

Recalling "that very, very sad episode in American history surrounding Watergate," Wright urged the administration to cooperate.

Other critics, like Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., are in a position to make life uncomfortable for the White House.

The Washington Post reported Saturday Reagan ordered CIA Director William Casey's silence about the operation. Leahy — vice chairman of the Senate In-

telligence Committee — believes Casey broke the law by violating a 1984 pact to keep Congress informed.

"There is a provision in the law which allows the White House to delay reporting of a covert action provided it is reported in a timely fashion," said Leahy. "Many Republicans and Democrats question whether 11 months is timely."

The White House will argue what Reagan calls his "secret diplomatic initiative to Iran" was an act of humanitarianism.

But some will wonder if humanitarian concerns are the first priority of a nation's foreign policy.

"He has damaged credibility everywhere," said Sen. James Exon, D-Neb. "And if the American people buy this one, God help us."

The president's men will also point to a Hill that leaks, congressmen who cannot keep a secret, as reason enough for a private brand of diplomacy.

But observers questioned whether Reagan's "Teflon" has worn off. In a season of foreign policy bombshells:

First there were reports that the administration had lied about Libya, launching a deliberate "disinformation" campaign to discredit Colonel Moammar Gadhafi — and topple his regime.

Then there were denials that USA journalist Nicholas Daniloff had been freed from a Soviet prison as part of a swap for a spy held in New York.

Later, there were attempts to rewrite the history of the Iceland summit, where Reagan nearly signed an arms deal that British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher has since talked him out of.

And then there was Iran.

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